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PP RUEHPA
DE RUEHUJA #1278/01 1951624
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 141624Z JUL 09
FM AMEMBASSY ABUJA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6536
INFO RUEHOS/AMCONSUL LAGOS PRIORITY 1641
RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA 1994
RUEHYD/AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE 0954
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RUZEJAA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 001278

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/W, INR/AA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/01/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: MEND "LEADER" HENRY OKAH ACCEPTS AMNESTY
BUT DOES NOT MEAN MUCH

REF: A. LAGOS 297

[1](#)B. ABUJA 1226 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Political Counselor Walter N.S. Pflaumer for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Henry Okah, sometimes described as "leader" of the Niger Delta "militant" umbrella organization, the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), who was on trial for treason and weapons trafficking, accepted President Yar'Adua's offer of amnesty, and was released from nearly 18 months of jail in Nigeria on July 13, 2009. Okah is the first well-known "militant leader" to accept amnesty from the GON. President Yar'Adua expressed his satisfaction with this development through his spokesman Segun Adeniyi, on the margins of the G-8 Summit meeting in L'Aquila, Italy. However, other "militant" leaders offered a different view, mainly opposition to Yar'Adua's amnesty offer, or seeking better terms within the amnesty offer, as evidenced most clearly by continued attacks on oil facilities and other threats of violence immediately following Okah's release. We continue to doubt that the amnesty offer, on its own, will lead anywhere as no clear or accepted political framework to resolve the region's issues has been developed. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) On July 9, Henry Okah accepted President Yar'Adua's offer of amnesty to all those associated with "militant" activity in the Niger Delta who agreed to lay down their arms by October 4. He was released from custody late on July 13. Okah has been held in prison for nearly 18 months and was facing trial by the GON for gun smuggling. On July 9, however, other MEND "leaders" rejected an immediate cease fire in its ongoing hostilities with the the Nigerian military's Joint Task Force (JTF) and instead intensified their campaign. In addition, MEND took responsibility for an attack late on July 12 on the Atlas Cove Jetty in Lagos harbor (see ref A), which caused an undetermined amount of damage and reportedly killed five people, mostly Nigerian navy personnel protecting the installation. (Note: Most of MEND's past activities since 2006 have been confined to the Niger Delta states of Bayelsa, Delta and Rivers, hundreds of kilometers from Lagos. End note.)

[1](#)3. (SBU) Government Ekpemupolo (aka "Tom Polo"), another key "militant" leader, rejected the amnesty policy and maintained that Okah's release had no connection to his continued operations. In addition, purported MEND spokesperson "Jomo Gbomo" issued a statement on July 13 that began with praise

for language in President Obama's Ghana speech about corrupt leaders who exploit their countries for self-enrichment, and ended with a biblical warning that "The mother of all plagues will be used as a last resort if the Nigerian Pharaohs show stubbornness over reasoning just as Moses did with the plague on the firstborn in ancient Egypt and the Americans with the plague of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

14. (C) Okah's lead counsel, Femi Falana, told Lagos Poloff on July 9 that Okah is suffering from kidney failure, a presumably major factor in his decision to accept the offer of amnesty. On July 13, Falana told Lagos Poloff that, after Okah's release by the court, all pending criminal charges against him were withdrawn. Falana said Attorney General Aondoakaa appeared in court on July 13 to "personally demonstrate the Government's intent to work with Okah to help restore law and order in the Niger Delta." Falana also postured that the attack in Lagos was executed to "demonstrate MEND's lack of confidence that the Federal Government would uphold its agreement to provide unconditional amnesty." He added that "the 'militants' wanted to speed Okah's release and the attack was to emphasize the urgency of his medical condition." Falana suggested that the attack is "a success" for MEND since the Government immediately responded in Okah's favor.

15. (C) COMMENT: We strongly doubt that the Lagos attack was timed to speed up Okah's release, since it was already clear from last week that the release was imminent. Knowledgeable observers believe the claim that Okah was the "leader" of MEND was always an exaggeration; moreover, he has been out of

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circulation for almost two years, leading us to question whether he still has much influence over other prominent "militant" figures. Much of his support stems from family and a small circle of friends, and many of his previous followers moved to other commanders during his two year absence. We therefore doubt that Okah's amnesty will have much of an impact on the ongoing level of violence by "militants" in the Delta. We also question whether the amnesty proposal will have much real impact on its own. Most "militants" do not need amnesty if they wish to abandon militancy; they can go home any time. The problem is that the deprivations of previous decades have left them little to go home to. Until the GON focuses on the core problems of the region, such as decades of neglect, large-scale corruption, environmental degradation, and criminality, the troubles in the Delta are likely to persist. END COMMENT.

16. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate Lagos.
SANDERS